

# 'Battle against Their Own Minds'

## Notes on Literate Kerala

Krishna Kumar

*The idea that illiterates are living in a dark age because of their illiteracy underlies the national literacy programme, yielding the stereotypes of the illiterate as submerged in a sea of darkness and the literate as bathing in the light of every kind of awareness. The human goals of education are sacrificed fully when the existing stratification of society is reified thus by a baseless, indeed irrational, use of knowledge to classify people.*

AS an academic visitor to Kerala I could not do worse than be a typical north-Indian who has no knowledge of any of the south-Indian languages. My saving grace was that I had been to Kerala thrice earlier, so I had some immunity to the shock that Kerala's green, prosperous landscape and its literate ethos give to the innocent first-time visitor from the north. As an added advantage, this time I was accompanied by a local gentleman who was willing to translate conversations. He was chosen by a friend, not the government—my host. This was important for two reasons: one, I was an 'official' visitor, sent by the National Literacy Mission; and two, I was dependent for each step I took in Kerala on the resources and kindness of the Kerala Saksharatha Samithi (KSS) set up by the government—As one coming from the Hindi belt I secretly feared being taken for an official ride. The fact is that I expected things to be different in Kerala, considering that the Kerala administration has so much to be pleased about in the popular appreciation of the 'Kerala model' of development. Surely officials could take some 'risk' there, and not be on stiff guard against revealing anything but the 'best', I thought. My visit proved this expectation to be exceedingly optimistic.

My visit was limited to three districts: Trivandrum, Malapuram and Idukki. In all, I went to 10 villages. These villages were selected by the government officials accompanying me. They had been told about the aim of my visit which was to look at the infrastructure created by the government for post-literacy work. My other main concern was to look at tribal villages many of which are still far from achieving 'total' literacy. Kerala as a whole is said to have achieved 'total' literacy by NLM norms (indeed, Kerala went beyond these norms by claiming literacy in 90 per cent of the 15 to 60 year old population rather than just the 15 to 35 year old) in 1992. However, the majority of the tribal people, who constitute a little more than 1 per cent of the total population, are not yet

literate. Out of the 10 villages I visited, three were inhabited by tribal people.

### COMMUNITY LIBRARIES

In Kerala one would not expect the progress of post-literacy work to be seen either as a problem or a challenge because Kerala has had a unique tradition of community libraries.<sup>1</sup> Setting tip of libraries had begun in the 19th century. A social campaign to set up and popularise community libraries started in 1945. Two years later the Kerala Granthasala Sangham (KGS) was formally registered. Already by 1948, there were 525 member-libraries functioning under the KGS's auspices, and performing a number of educational roles apart from lending books. In her *Blossoms in the Dust*, Kusum Nair noted that at the time of her visit in 1958, "almost every village has a genuine library with anything from 1,000 to 4,000 books and several hundred members".<sup>2</sup> Member-libraries received a grant-in-aid from the KGS, fixed according to the grade of a library. It seems that the take-over of the KGS by the government through an ordinance issued in 1977 proved a sad sort of turning point in the history of this movement. Community support dwindled, and government grants failed to keep up with inflation.

The few rural libraries I was able to visit did not seem to be in a state of health, financial or functional. The volunteer-librarians of these little outfits were keen to know if I could help them get some extra resources from Delhi. In one case, I had reason to believe that the young librarian had cooked up records of the daily borrowings, apparently with a view to ensuring the continuation of government grant. The size of these village libraries varied, but hardly any of them had a reasonable space for maintenance and display of the books they possessed. In a province where every space is attractively maintained, no library that I visited could be said to be an attractive well-lit, tidy place. Newspapers were invariably matted around in crumpled shape, obviously showing that they had been read, by

many, and books were nowhere classified in any scientific manner. In a state where libraries had apparently flourished not so long ago, the sights I saw clearly spoke of neglect and indifference. The saddest of these sights was the children's section in the magnificent building of Trivandrum State Library. Nicely carpentered furniture, donated by the British Council, stood in a dimly lit hall with thousands of undusted books lying disarranged around on shelves. Two boys were rummaging in one of the piles in the dark.

KGS figures on the 12th page of the Kerala government's ambitious proposal for a 'continuing education programme' which incorporates the post-literacy phase of the 'total' literacy drive. Member-libraries of the KGS are proposed to be used as the venue for the new Jan A Vidya Kendras. The proposal says: "Suitable arrangements will have to be made with the Granthasala Sangham to set up the JVK in the libraries controlled by it". Apparently, the government does not think that a functioning library system is a post-literacy structure. All it needs in Kerala is resuscitation with imaginative planning and reconstruction of its decaying physical and financial infrastructures. Obviously, that is not the way things are conceptualised or verbalised these days. While rural libraries will languish and starve, money will gush and disappear into modern buzz-words like 'environment-building' and 'training'. Out of a budget for Rs 630.25 lakh, Rs 122.25 lakh will be spent in Kerala on 'training' which is the single biggest component of the budget if we leave aside salaries. Training seems to be the most pernicious of all the expressions that penetrated the diction of developmentalism in the post-Emergency era. It gobbles up funds and generates a vacuous sense of achievement among those in charge. What happens in a typical training programme (the Kerala proposal outlines training in three phases, each time for two days) is hard to associate with any connotations one might see in the word. The Oxford dictionary presents 'training' as a verb which means "to bring a person or animal to desired state or standard of efficiency". What training conveys in its trivialised usage in current organisational parlance is a rite of initiation for newly recruited functionaries. The rite is performed with the help of assorted lectures and invocations.

In the American setting, where training is an acknowledged necessity for daily living itself, initiation rites are only a part of the show; in our case, they become the whole show. And later on come in-service training, monitoring, and evaluation, all performed with an eye on verbal and fiscal correctness. The development game in its post-modernist phase is an inventory of events invoked with the sole purpose of consuming alio-

cated funds. Building a lasting structure such as a library system and making it work with grace and commitment to readers is not only too old-fashioned an idea for these times, but also unsuitable because it does not feature planned obsolescence.

#### AT A STANDSTILL

As you drive from Thiruvananthapuram towards Ernakulam and beyond, you are struck by the emergent character of Kerala's new middle class. Palatial-looking houses, mosques that rise out of the horizon in the shocking splendour of fresh chemical paints, and hotels waiting for customers are no simple symbolic artefacts. They convey aloud the stagnation of Kerala's social imagination. Robin Jeffrey<sup>3</sup> notes in his recent book how little the government knows about ways to channelise repatriated money towards productive initiative. Indeed, it is not possible to say that the enormous wealth sent home by Keratites abroad has taken Kerala along the path consistent with its own history. Kerala's economy does not appear to be moving in any direction one could call 'growth'. Availability of money earned abroad and diversion of cultivable land towards cash crops for export seem to have boosted consumerism, socially destructive ostentation, and corruption in public life, not welfare. In the social climate one notices in Kerala today one finds it difficult to recall that this society had gone through an impressive cultural transformation not so long ago.

What you make of Kerala today depends on what you believe to be the moving force of Kerala's self-transformation between the third and the eighth decades of this century. Panikkar makes the point that "the society of Kerala today has only a remote semblance to the caste-ridden, inward-looking and stagnant society of 50 years ago".<sup>4</sup> I feel Jeffrey is right in seeing Kerala's transformation more as a result of historical circumstances than purposive action. Also, I feel the cultural advantage Kerala had in its matrilineal traditions has not been adequately appreciated or analysed. In his rarely read book *The Personality of Kerala*, Aiyappan<sup>5</sup> describes some aspects of matriliney which offer the ground for a generalised hypothesis about the psycho-social advantages of Keratites compared to other cultural groups in India. As one waits for a reasonable analysis of these advantages, one notes with dismay that matriliney is in fast decline. And if one goes by the ascendance of religious fanaticism, violence against women, and political corruption, one would conclude that Kerala's self-transformation has slowed down if it has not already come to a stand-still. No doubt, the fruits of the process will continue to hang around for some time, attracting the attention of observers. The most impressive of such fruits is Kerala's achievement in public health. The other fruit, universal primary education, may already be showing signs of decay.

Only 50 per cent of the children who appeared in the school-leaving examination last year could pass. In five out of the 14 districts of Kerala, namely, Kasaragod, Wayanad, Kozhikode, Palakkad and Malapuram, the pass percentage was less than 50. In Malapuram, where only 27 per cent of the children who appeared were declared to have passed, a survey recently carried out as part of the Saksharatha Jana Vignana Yagna revealed that 'more than 45 per cent of the primary school children could not even write five simple Malayalam words correctly'. The test used in this survey was pitched well below the level of performance expected of a grade five child. The shocking situation revealed by the test results was quickly sought to be remedied by an after-school programme which had the laudable purpose of 'eradication of literacy from schools' and to establish a 'rapport between formal and informal (non-formal?) education'. Following a book of imaginative activities centred around a boy called Manikuttan, the programme achieved spectacular success in a short time—thirty hours spread over three months.

The success of this programme only showed that the failure of the school in making children actively literate was purely pedagogical. Indeed, Kerala is hardly left with any of the social impediments (eg, negative attitudes towards education of girls, use of children as cheap labour, excruciating poverty and malnutrition) which are put up elsewhere in the country to hide the failure of the state to alter entrenched pedagogic culture. The Malapuram story confirms that pedagogical modernisation

need not be mystified as some Utopian or romantic idea dependent on glossy toys and technology. Yet, the ironical fact remains that Manikuttan-centred activities are considered feasible only for remedial work. The mainstream, formal system always treats such activities as part of non-formal education. The formal school in Kerala is as stuffy and conventional as it is anywhere else. A large number of elementary schools in Kerala run in one long shed with no walls between classes. The one I visited in Peringamala village of Thiruvananthapuram district was particularly sad-looking—dark, because there is no electricity, and totally unequipped except with blackboards'. Peringamala is a tribal village where the Kannikars live. The village has a high school where the SLC result this year was less than 10 percent, and I was told that no one had passed last year. Up to class VII, some 90 per cent are compulsorily passed as a matter of policy.

#### TRIBAL POPULATION

The tribal population has apparently posed a special challenge to the literacy drive in Kerala. Although the state is now 'totally' literate by NLM standards, nearly half of the 1.5 lakh tribal people, who were identified as being illiterate, have remained illiterate after the completion of the TLC. During my visit I had the opportunity to meet some 14 individuals who belonged to the Kanikkar, Muthuvan, and Mannan tribes. The locations where they live are highly inaccessible, in one case atop a steep mountain with a slope of slippery rock over a considerable stretch. Women carrying heavy loads of firewood walked down as we climbed up.

#### *Technocracy and Bureaucracy in*

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One load of wood fetches Rs 25 in the bazaar of Adimali situated at the bottom of the hill. Imparting literacy in a terrain such as this must present enormous difficulties. The KSS decided to pay a modest honorarium for this work, Rs 200 to non-resident instructors and Rs 500 to resident instructors. This kind of payment violates the NLM's norm of voluntary service. This is why the payment of instructors' allowance for the first five months of 1993 ran into trouble, and in May the programme seems to have been stopped, pending payments by the centre to the state. I met a tribal youth who had worked as a resident instructor; he appeared certain that he would not have much to do with the post-literacy programme unless his arrears were paid first. Talking to him one wondered how a post-literate Kerala, or for that matter any other state, will maintain people's interest in reading without a financially viable infrastructure. In some other parts of Kerala I saw evidence of enormous interest in youth leaders for community work. Such interest too will need institutionalisation if it is to last.

Tribal education presents a very special problem in the general context of the relationship between education and culture which is a neglected subject of study and reflection. No bridges seem possible to build between the world that a tribal person carries in his mind and the one constructed around the system of education. From the perspective of the latter, the former inevitably looks obscurantist, magical and irrational. Education can only mean an aggression on this world. To a certain extent, this role of education is generalisable to different sections of the oppressed, but the cutting edge of educational aggression aimed at the tribes is especially hard and sharp. The cassette produced by the KSS to popularise the tribal literacy programme confidently calls it as a 'battle against their (ie, the tribes') own minds'. This description is in sharp contrast to the message conveyed through newspaper advertisements given the NLM on the occasion of the Education for All Summit held in New Delhi in mid-December, 1993. The message was: 'People have a right to their own minds'. The KSS tape suggests that the tribes are not covered by the NLM message. Considering the current state of tribal educational planning and the philosophy underlying it, the Kerala message seems closer to reality.

During my meeting with tribal literacy-learners in different villages I asked them, "What difference has literacy made to you?" Without exception, every respondent said, "Literacy has showed us how to live." The answer was shocking, coming as it did from members of groups which had survived the most difficult terrains and living conditions. "Are you saying that you didn't know how to live before this?" I asked. This time the uniform answer was, "Literacy has showed us the correct way to live". There can hardly be a doubt that this manner of response, and per-

haps thinking too, was drilled into these unfortunate victims of what is not just a literacy programme, but a programme of acculturation. That the drilling has worked is not surprising. The poor have always known when to say what the masters have told them to. A Malayalam folksong, translated by Ayyappa Panikkar, says:

When food and sleep must be sacrificed  
Lakshmana is the best by far  
Bharata is the ideal in battle  
Parrot the ideal of speech...<sup>6</sup>

The idea that the illiterates are living in a dark age because of their illiteracy underlies a large number of materials produced for neo-literates. Many of these booklets centre on the theme that a new life awaits the literate. Brimming with awareness and ideas, this new life basically follows the prototype constructed in the 50s under the auspices of the community development programme. The main features of the prototype are hygiene, mothercraft, family planning, nutrition, knowledge of modern means of agriculture, and readiness to challenge superstitions. These are all unexceptionable ideas for anyone, literate or otherwise, but literacy and post-literacy materials present them in a manner suggesting that the illiterate alone need to be guided by these principles. It is assumed that the literate have a right to teach the illiterate a thing or two regarding all of these ideals. It is this assumption that underlies the stereotype of the illiterate as being submerged in a sea of darkness, and that of the literate as one bathing in the light of every kind of awareness. The human goals of education are sacrificed fully when the existing stratification of society is reified in this blatant manner by an otherwise baseless, indeed irrational, use of knowledge as a criterion to classify people. In the case of the tribal illiterate, the daribess associated with illiteracy assumes deeper hues.

#### BANAL MESSAGE

For years I have been trying to find out why literacy experts insist on literacy primers and post-literacy materials imparting moral lessons rather than just literacy. The only answer I have found so far is that literacy—that is, the ability to read, and of course to write—appears to literacy experts as too modest and inconsequential a gain in return for a massive investment of funds and effort. One can say with certainty that literacy programmes are not really about reading; they have a deeper, ulterior motive, which is to acculturate the illiterate. It is on account of this motive that precious tonnes of paper are used to teach people banalities like the need to wash hands after going to toilet or the virtues of a daily bath. Who bathes, how, and with how much water and at what cost to the state, the environment, and to fellow human beings could be an interesting subject for a book for neo-literates; but such writing would be against the grain of the IPCL guidelines approved by the NLM. It would also be

against the general orthodoxy of what constitutes appropriate material for the newly literate. Following this orthodoxy, the book *Neerchalukal* by Ravanaprabhu tells us that "the child should be in a happy environment with plenty of opportunity for laughter and play". How one wishes this message were disseminated among teachers and managers of nurseries and primary schools in Kerala and elsewhere, rather than be wasted on poor neo-literates.

Another book, entitled *Uruvilakku*, by R Aduthila, presents an enlightened Kannan who questions the 'mantravadi' or the oracle. The infuriated oracle retaliates by mouthing all sorts of threats about what will happen to the rivers and the sky, and so on. These threats are supposed to be ridiculous; but as it happens, they all sound realistic in the context of the ecological degradation that is taking place everywhere as also in Kerala. The heavy, didactic tone of these books, based as they are on the assumption that the illiterate's style of life is all wrong, leaves few exceptions. One such exception is a book called *Thullimazha* by Jacob Samson Muttada. It is a collection of poems full of humour and insight into common things. One of the poems in this collection talks about the murderous screams coming from a neighbour's house. When investigated, the screams turn out to be coming from the throat of a nursery child who was being pressed to read! Why cannot the fellow-feeling and lack of design evident in this book be less rare in neo-literate literature? Apparently because those involved in planning literacy for the masses are convinced that illiteracy epitomises the ignorance and stupidity of the masses. My most poignant memory of Kerala from this visit is that of a woman who stood in the middle of the road for a moment, unable to decide whether to go back or forward while our speeding Ambassador came close. The district co-ordinator sitting with me said, "She must be an illiterate". He thought it was an appropriate joke.

#### Notes

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- 1 K Sivadasan Pillai (ed), *Kerala Granthasala Sangham* (1945-1980) (Thiruvananthapuram: KGS, 1981).
- 2 Kusum Nair, *Blossoms in the Dust* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1961), p 39.
- 3 Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-being* (Delhi: OUP, 1993).
- 4 K N Panikkar, *Folklore of Kerala* (New Delhi: NBT, 1991).
- 5 A Aiyappan, *The Personality of Kerala* (Thiruvananthapuram: University of Kerala, 1982).
- 6 Quoted in Panikkar. op cit.